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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the development of a program of writing instruction across the curriculum at William Jewell College. It reports on a series of faculty forums that discussed what the college-wide standards for effective writing should be, investigated multidisciplinary instruction in writing, and considered a proficiency test. Descriptions of the diagnostic test used, the writing center, writing courses beyond freshman composition, the proficiency test required to attain junior standing, the use of the ACT Educational Opportunity Service, and the booklet outlining the writing expectations at Jewell College are included. The paper concludes with several observations about the rationale for not teaching remedial courses and some of the advantages expected from the writing program. (TJ)

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A College-Wide Review of Writing Instruction and the Adoption Of a New Program in Writing Instruction at a Four-Year Liberal Arts College

In the fall 1977 faculty workshop, the teachers at William Jewell College indicated in a poll that improving the writing skills of students should be the college's highest priority--of greater importance than the issues of merit pay and faculty representation on budget discussions. Shortly thereafter, the Dean of the College, in consultation with the Curriculum Committee, established an interdisciplinary subcommittee to review the development of writing skills among Jewell students and to make recommendations to the faculty about how those skills could be improved. This paper is a narrative of the activities of the committee and a description of the recommendations which were formally adopted by the faculty in the spring of 1979. The report should be of interest to college faculty and administrators who are reviewing their own writing programs because of the range of procedures it offers which are cost-effective. It should also give evidence of the genuine interest of faculty outside the English department in writing as a central feature of education.

The faculty priority on writing skills suggested two things to the committee. First, the faculty was discontent about the level of writing proficiency which it saw and wanted it to be improved. The faculty in its malaise was sharing in discomfort the country as a whole was feeling about the decline in ACT English and SAT verbal scores and about the decline in verbal skill which those tests measure.

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The mean ACT English scores of entering freshmen at Jewell had dropped from 20.5 in 1969 to 20.2 in 1974 to 19.4 in 1975 to 19.2 in 1977. The faculty could no longer assume the same kind of preparation in writing among the entering students which it once could.

Secondly, the committee interpreted the results of the poll and countless conversations with faculty members as an affirmation of the central role writing should have in a liberal arts education. The faculty believes that writing and learning are necessary partners. It agrees with Janet Emig that writing "involves the fullest possible functioning of the brain" and that in writing, acquisition of knowledge is clearly identifiable:

> Clear writing by definition is that writing which signals without ambiguity the nature of conceptual relationships.[1]

The faculty has also heard from alumni and employers who give unqualified assurance that writing skills are indispensable in most professions and that effective writing can advance a career as certainly as clumsy and ineffective writing can hinder a career. Writing seems to be central to education and valuable for the careers of our graduates.

Based on these assumptions about what the poll indicated of attitudes at Jewell--that writing skills here needed to be enhanced and that writing is important in a liberal education--the task facing the committee became clear. It needed to identify the procedures which would give students experience in developing their writing skills and which would assess their skills, to the end that students would feel a justifiable self-confidence in their ability to use written discourse as a natural means of self-expression and a ready and comfortable tool in the analysis and presentation of data.

During the 1978-79 academic year the Writing Skills Committee sponsored three activities to learn more about our students' writing abilities and to help students achieve the basic writing skills for college work. During the summer of 1978 some members reviewed many of the tests which are available from publishers and testing agencies, in search of a diagnostic test which would help students see the areas of strength and weakness in their writing development, and a test which could be administered to all entering students during Orientation Week in the one and a half hour period available for such a test.

Various features of the different tests made them unsuitable. The Harcourt Brace diagnostic tests would have taken about five hours to administer.[2] The Random House test did not have the features to be tested grouped together, making scoring without computer assistance an insurmountable obstacle.[3] Other tests, such as the Test of Standard Written English, did not reveal patterns of strength and weakness.[4] The committee therefore decided to design its own test. Following the format of a test used at the University of Missouri: Kansas City, the chair of the committee produced a test and pretested it in two classes during the summer, noting the time the test took to administer and problems of various kinds which came up. The test was revised, actually much of it was rewritten--it was pretested again, adjusted again, and finally administered to the entering students.

The test diagnosed the student's ability to spell and to recog-gize errors in ten areas of traditional difficulty for college freshmen: sentence fragments, run-on sentences, subject-verb agreement, use of pronouns, dangling constructions, apostrophes, commas, semicolons and

colons, nonparallel constructions, and quotations. The tests were scored in the Writing Center and the results sent to the students, and only to the students, with a note of explanation which encouraged the student to review the scores and to stop by the Writing Center voluntarily to work on the areas of weakness.

The second activity which the Writing Skills Committee sponsored was a writing laboratory, the Writing Center, opened in the fall of 1978 and available to students on a voluntary basis and on referral by faculty. The Writing Center is staffed by a student proctor and a supervising faculty member. The Writing Center is designed to be a place where a student who has weaknesses in his writing development and who is likely not to be success-oriented in his writing experiences can work successfully on exercises over a range of problem areas. The operating procedures are based on the five principles for successful individualized instruction identified by K. Patricia Cross:

> Active, not passive students; clear goals for the students; small modules of learning; evaluation through frequent testing, and self-paced learning.

When a student first comes to the Center, a brief explanation of the program is offered to him, the voluntary nature of the self-paced instruction is explained to him, and he is make to feel at ease. If he has brought a referral form, the special needs indicated by the instructor are reviewed. It he has come on his own initiative, his own concerns about his writing are discussed. If he has not taken the diagnostic test, he takes it; it is scored while he is still in the Center; and results of the test are discussed with him. The staff and the student mutually agree on areas where work is

needed and make a list of assignments corresponding to the weaknesses. The student signs a promise to complete the program of exercises agreed on.

When the student returns for a lesson, he is introduced to a lesson in a workbook,[6] allowed to study the lesson, and is then asked to write out the exercises designed to give him practice doing correctly what he formerly had trouble with. As he finishes each lesson, his work is checked, and he is asked to revise sentences he has missed until he achieves a perfect score for the assignment. In cases where students show that they have clearly not learned the material, additional exercises are found in other workbooks.[7] Students with dialect difficulties, for example, often need much more extensive work with subject-verb agreement. After the student has finished the exercises, he is given post-tests in each of the areas he has worked on.[8] The results of the post-tests are compared to the diagnostic test results. Usually the student is pleased with the results, but areas in which improvement is not satisfying to the student in consultation with the Writing Center staff are then designated again as problem areas and the student works on additional exercises and takes another post-test. Students are encouraged to finish their programs in three weeks of daily visits for one-hour lessons.

Reports to referring faculty are made for students who come to the Center. Seventy-eight visits were recorded during the first nine weeks of the operation of the Center, moving from five visits per week to a high of 15 visits, for an average of about eight and a half visits per week. We had twelve students referred by faculty for

the same nine-week period (Jewell has 1400 students). For the second semester, sixty-five students, most of whom were referrals, logged 234 visits.

The third project the Writing Skills Committee sponsored was a series of three forums during the fall of 1978 to discuss three issues--determining what the college-wide standards for effective writing are, investigating multi-disciplinary instruction in writing, and considering a proficiency test at Jewell. For the first forum, the Committee requested and received permission to reproduce and distribute to the faculty copies of George C. Klinger, "A Campus view of College Writing," which formed the basis of our discussion.[9] For the second and third forums, the committee invited consultants to report on programs at other colleges--Professor Elizabeth Ciner of St. Olaf College on multidisciplinary instruction in writing, and Professor Betty Melick of Baker University on proficiency testing.

Based on our review of the writing skills of the students, the opinions of faculty and students, and the programs at other colleges, the Writing Skills Committee then recommended that William Jewell College proceed with a writing enhancement program with the following features: a diagnostic test should be given to all students entering William Jewell College; a writing center should be available on a voluntary and referral basis to any interested student; beginning with the class entering in 1979, students should be required to take two courses beyond freshman composition which provide opportunity for additional writing experiences; beginning with the class entering in 1979, students should be required to pass a writing proficiency test

in essay form before admission to Junior standing; the college should use the ACT Educational Opportunity Service for a trial five-year period to locate and attempt to recruit students who show superior ability in verbal skills and who would benefit from the program for writing enhancement at William Jewell; a booklet should be prepared to outline the writing expectations of William Jewell; and the catalog should be revised to reinforce the college focus on effective writing. These recommendations were approved by faculty action during the spring of 1979.

The Diagnostic Test

The committee found a correlation between ACT English scores of 16.8 and a failing grade (an average of 69) on the English department staff-graded final examination in freshman composition, and a correlation between a total score of 28.3 on the diagnostic test and an average score of 69 on the staff-graded final examination. The results of the diagnostic test which are sent to the students will therefore include an explanatory note with a special appeal to students with 17 or below on the ACT English or a score of 29 or below on the diagnostic test to seek help at the Writing Center. Correlation studies will be conducted each year to keep the scores current.

The Writing Center

The Writing Center will be continued, available to students who come on a voluntary basis and on referral by faculty. Records of student visits and performance will continue to be kept and an evaluation procedure will be established to determine the long-term effectiveness of the Center.

Writing Courses Beyond Freshman Composition

According to polls taken of faculty and students, the college offers a wide variety of courses which require writing in them, and students indicate that they have done considerable writing at Jewell. Faculty are teaching courses in which writing experiences are being provided for up to 1600 students per year. Graduating seniors also perceive themselves as having had many writing experiences. The median response to the question, "How many courses of any kind did you have at Jewell which required a total of ten pages or more of writing?" was six. Students also expressed satisfaction with their writing capabilities. In response to the question, "Do you feel that your writing skills are adequate for you as you enter the next stage of your career?" 92% said, "Yes."

The writing skills committee concluded that much writing instruction was taking place beyond freshman composition, and that students generally felt good about their abilities, but that the development of writing skills among the students at Jewell would benefit from formalizing the procedures whereby all students would be required to take at least two courses beyond freshman composition in which writing is expected. Additionally, the committee concluded that the considerable instruction in writing which was being done by the different faculty members could be aided by providing workshops in which faculty in the different disciplines could be coached in instruction in writing. Many students would continue to take several courses with writing demands, but all students would have at least two such courses; and faculty interested in teaching writing would benefit from the workshops devoted to sharing information about teaching writing.

Beginning with the class entering in the fall of 1979, students will be required to take two courses beyond freshman composition with writing expectations and instruction in them, taught by faculty who volunteer to teach them and who agree to provide instruction in writing in the courses and to require as a minimum the equivalent of three 1000-word papers. Workshops will be provided for participating faculty who would like guidance in teaching writing, using the Ithaca seminars (ERIC Report 145475) as the model.

The Proficiency Test

Beginning with the class entering in the fall of 1979, students will be required to pass a proficiency test of writing skills before admission to Junior standing. Transfer students who receive a C or higher in a composition course at another college may receive transfer credit for the course at WJC, and will be advised to do one of the following:

1. Take composition at WJC for a second semester's credit and to prepare for the proficiency test.
2. Study for the proficiency test without the course, but with help sought voluntarily at the Writing Center.

A student who has had two semesters of composition at another college and has received a C or above in each course can receive two semesters of transfer credit and will be advised to do one of the following:

1. Take composition at WJC without credit to prepare for the proficiency test.
2. Study for the proficiency test without the course, but with help sought voluntarily at the Writing Center.

Grades of D or below in composition classes will not receive

transfer credit at Jewell.

The English department staff-graded final exam for freshman composition, consisting of two different essays written at two different times, will be the setting for the proficiency test. Students taking freshman composition who pass both halves of the test will have satisfied the proficiency test requirement. Transfer students will also need to pass both parts of the exam. Students who do not succeed on the exam will be advised about help available: the Writing Center, (re)taking freshman composition, or taking courses with writing expectations in them.

The ACT Educational Opportunity Service

The college will use the Educational Opportunity Service of the ACT for a trial five-year period beginning in 1979 for the entering class of 1980 to identify and attempt to recruit students who show superior ability in verbal skills and who would benefit from the program for writing enhancement at William Jewell. The college will work closely with ACT to determine the factors for optimum results. The program will be successful to the extent the evidence suggests Jewell is in fact receiving more students with higher verbal skills as a result of the trial program.

The Booklet

A booklet outlining the writing expectations at William Jewell with comments from faculty, students, and alumni about the function of effective writing is being produced, and will be kept current. Distributed to entering students, such a booklet can accomplish several things. It can make clear to students that Jewell is a college which places a high regard on effective writing, and it should help clarify what is considered good writing by faculty here and by

other people who ought to know.

Other Observations

The committee was aware that programs of two required semesters of composition are common in colleges and universities, and that remedial sections are either available or required for students with weaker writing skills at many colleges and universities. We concluded, however, that two semesters of composition should not be required at Jewell nor that remedial sections of composition should be instituted. To provide instruction in a second semester of composition would require the addition of a minimum of two staff positions. The committee also concluded that instruction in writing related to specific courses and disciplines gives the student a practical application of his developing writing skills which a second course in composition alone could not give.

While there are many arguments for remedial sections of freshman composition, the committee decided that the stigma associated with being placed in a remedial section was out of keeping with prevailing preferences of faculty and students at Jewell. Remedial sections, which usually have fewer students (often ten to fifteen) than regular sections, would also involve a greater cost to the college. The committee concluded that students with weaker writing skills would be amply served with the program outlined above.

Conclusion

As the program is just now being implemented, it is too early to guess which features will last, but it does seem to offer two attractive benefits. The whole program will cost very little.

Proctors at the Writing Center are either on work-study or are doing the work as a practicum in teaching writing; the diagnostic test is produced and refined on campus; the proficiency test uses an existing mechanism, the staff-graded final exam in composition; the booklet will be paid for by entering students; and no new faculty positions will need to be budgeted. The second advantage of the program is that it places writing at the core of the curriculum. Students will get a variety of writing experiences sponsored by trained instructors in several disciplines, not just the English department. The genuine interest in the program by most faculty members in most disciplines--an interest in writing which teachers of English have sometimes hoped was out there and sometimes despaired of finding--is heartening.

Endnotes:

[1]"Writing as a Mode of Learning," CCC (May, 1977), 125.

[2]Sheila Y. Graham, Diagnostic Tests to Accompany Harbrace College Handbook, Harbrace College Workbook (New York, n. d.).

[3]Robert Atwan, The Random House Diagnostic Test of English Composition (New York, 1977).

[4]Two of the most thorough tests we did find were the Usage and Sentence Structure sections of the Descriptive Tests of Language Skills, developed by the College Board and administered by the Educational Testing Service. These tests report on seven areas of writing development--pronouns, modifiers, diction and idioms, verbs; using complete sentences, using coordination and subordination appropriately, and placing modifiers appropriately. These areas, unfortunately, did not correspond exactly with the areas most often discussed by faculty members at Jewell (see below, pp. 3-4).

[5]Accent on Learning (San Francisco, 1976), pp. 52ff. Quoted in Mary Kathryn Grant and Daniel Hoeber, Basic Skills Programs: Are They Working?, AAHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Report, Number 1 (Washington, D. C., 1978), p. 27.

[6]Joan G. Roloff and Robert C. Wylder, The Writing Book (Encino, California, 1978).

[7]For examples, Penelope Choy, Basic Grammar and Usage (New York, 1978); Susan Fawcett and Alvin Sandberg, Grassroots: The Writer's Workbook (Boston, 1976); George Feinstein, Programmed Writing Skills (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1976); Sheila Y. Graham, Harbrace College Workbook, Form 8 B (New York, 1978);

William Herman and Jeffrey M. Young, Troubleshooting Basic Writing Skills (New York, 1978).

[8]Joan G. Roloff and Robert C. Wylder, Tests to Accompany The Writing Book (Encino, California, 1978). We have developed post-tests for spelling in addition to the tests for the other areas in this test series.

[9]CCC, 28 (December, 1977), 343-47.